

Molina tours Westlake's mean streets

Councilwoman urges neighbors to become 'catalysts' for change

BY JULIE JASKOL

Councilwoman Gloria Molina didn't get the kind of reception she hoped for when she went house to house in the Westlake area last weekend urging neighbors to band together to clean up their neighborhoods. First, a woman slammed her window shut in Molina's face when the councilwoman took her to task for tossing trash out her window onto the sidewalk at 5th and Bonnie Brae streets. Then the feisty councilwoman argued with a drug dealer she spotted making a transaction on the same corner. The man, who said he was just waiting for a friend, disappeared when she turned to call the police.

And when she faced the crowd at a meeting she'd called last week to organize neighborhood clean-up efforts, she was disheartened at how few of those residents she'd spoken to on Saturday were in the audience. "Let me ask a sad question," she said. "How many of you live in the area?" Fourteen hands went up. "I was afraid of that," she sighed. "We bureaucrats outnumber the residents here about three to one."

Indeed, city department representatives showed up in force, perhaps because Molina is known to follow trash trucks and street sweepers around her district. But dogging city departments is not enough, says Molina, and that's why she donated \$75,000 of her office budget to create MASH-LA (More Advocates for Safe Homes), and she's urging neighbors to join. "I'll keep after the bureaucrats and see they're doing their job," she said. "But we need people's help, too. Unfortunately, a lot of people believe landlords are responsible for every little thing."

Molina and representatives from the departments of building and safety, sanitation, health, transportation,



Gloria Molina

public works, and the police told the crowd, in both English and Spanish, how they could take responsibility for cleaning up graffiti, abandoned cars, uncollected garbage, and other blights.

Molina urged them to go one step beyond simply phoning the city to pick up trash or tow away cars. "We figure if there's at least one person on every block to bring together neighbors to discuss conditions, we can create a framework of small groups throughout the district," she said. These groups, working with money and assistance from Molina's office, could be the catalyst for a change in attitude in neighborhoods that have all but given up, she said.

"We can start building up the confidence the government will work for people, that the city will provide services. But most of all, you'll be a part of keeping your own city safe and clean," she said.

Juanita Dellomes, chairperson of the Beverly/Temple Corridor Property Owners/Renters Association and a

number of the MASH-LA Council, which coordinates groups from an office on Third and Alvarado streets, told the crowd to have confidence. "Don't say it can't be done; it can," she said. "In 1985 we started with one small area, and in that area we walked house-to-house and got block captains on each block."

As a result, she said, half her neighborhood's most serious problems have been resolved. "You must complain two times, three times, until the inspector gets to know you," she said. "But if you don't, our problems are not going away. They're just going to get worse."

In addition to asking for residents' help, Molina warned she is instructing the city to crack down on apartment managers and landlords who don't maintain buildings and motorists who park illegally or work on their cars on streets and in alleys. She said the city will begin citing violators, "no matter whose fault it is." She also warned neighbors to expect the "Denver boot" on their cars if they ignore posted streetsweeping hours.

At the end of the meeting, nearly a dozen residents signed up to begin MASH-LA groups in their neighborhoods. To Ricardo Monterrosa, who has lived on 5th Street near Bonnie Brae for a decade, and complained, to applause from the crowd, about drugs and crime there, MASH-LA sounded like an idea that might work. "We need the support," he said. "We need someone who can help us."

For Yolanda Mendez, a MASH-LA Council member and a resident of city housing at Burlington and 18th, MASH-LA is an alternative to living in fear. "My neighbors are interested in getting together, but they're afraid: they've seen too much violence," she said. "Not that we can stop the crime, but if we get together, if we get more than a handful of people, they can't point to one person and say 'Well, she got us in trouble.'"